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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 011373

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOC IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS DENY ENTRY TO FOUR
INTERNATIONAL UNION LEADERS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Milton K. Drucker for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: Over the weekend of October 30-31, GOC immigration officials denied entry to four international labor leaders, including one U.S. citizen, and cancelled the tourist visas of approximately 60 others, while permitting them to stay for a period of three days pending resolution of their cases. The 60 labor leaders were later granted permission to stay until November 30. The labor leaders had been invited to attend a meeting of female trade unionists organized by Colombia's major labor federations. According to GOC officials, none of the labor leaders possessed visas consistent with the purpose of their visit. On November 2, Vice-President Santos publicly apologized for the incident and announced all four labor leaders were welcome to return. MFA officials attributed the incident to immigration officers' strict interpretation of the country's visa regulations and told labor leaders the decision did not represent an effort to undermine freedom of association. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On October 30-31, GOC immigration officials at Bogota's El Dorado international airport denied entry to four international labor leaders. The four men -- U.S. citizen Cameron Duncan of Public Services International; Panamanian Rodolfo Benitez of the Switzerland-based Union Network International; Brazilian Antonio Fritz of the International Transport Workers' Federation; and Venezuelan Victor Baez, General Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' regional organization for the Americas -- had been invited to attend a meeting of female trade unionists. According to MFA Americas Division desk officer Francisco Gonzalez, the names of the four labor leaders, who arrived in Bogota without visas, were on a GOC watchlist because they had previously violated Colombian immigration regulations requiring travelers to obtain special visas if they plan to participate in speaking events, rallies, or marches during their stay in the country. (Citizens of the United States, Panama, Brazil, and Venezuela may enter Colombia without a visa if the purpose of their visit is purely tourism.) All four had visited Colombia in September to participate in pro-labor events organized by Colombia's three main labor federations.

3. (SBU) Over the last few days of October, Colombian immigration officials granted approximately 60 other international labor leaders three-day stays to attend the labor event, even though they had arrived in Colombia with only tourist visas. On November 3, Gonzalez explained that the 60 labor leaders were "paroled" into the country pending resolution of their cases, and had since been granted permission to remain in Colombia until November 30.

4. (SBU) On November 2, MFA and immigration officials met with the leaders of Colombia's major labor federations to explain the weekend's events. According to Gonzalez, the MFA said the decision to turn around the four labor leaders was made by immigration officials at the airport on the basis of a strict interpretation of the country's visa regulations. MFA representatives assured labor leaders that the decision did not represent an effort to undermine freedom of association. The same day, Vice-President Francisco Santos publicly apologized for the incident and announced that all four union leaders were welcome to return to Colombia. However, Benitez publicly speculated in press interviews that the four union leaders' names were placed on the watchlist after a tense meeting with President Alvaro Uribe during their September visit.

5. (SBU) On November 3, Emboff spoke by telephone with Duncan, a long-time Embassy contact. Duncan, who arrived in Colombia at 11 p.m. on October 31 on a flight from Miami, said he had not been aware he needed a special visa to participate in a labor event. When an immigration officer asked Duncan if he had attended labor events in Colombia in September, he responded in the affirmative. The immigration official then told Duncan he would need to speak to a shift supervisor, who told him two other trade unionists had been denied entry earlier that day because they had previously

attended labor events in Colombia without a proper visa. The official then told Duncan that he was denying him entry for the same reason. When Duncan asked about the possibility of obtaining the requisite visa, immigration officials told him the following day was a Colombian holiday and recommended he apply for a new visa at the Colombian Embassy in Washington. Duncan spent the rest of the night at the airport and returned to Miami on the first available flight at 8 a.m. on November 1.

16. (C) Comment: Most governments, including the USG, turn around visitors who fail to present proper visas at ports of entry. However, a persistent challenge for the GOC is sensitizing immigration, law enforcement, and military authorities to the need to avoid taking actions that can easily be perceived as heavy-handed or that needlessly provoke domestic and international NGOs, including labor organizations. End Comment.
WOOD